DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 057 CS 500 563

AUTHOR Minister, Kristina
TITLE A Theory of Meaning for the Performance of Literature.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Doctoral Honors Seminar, "The Phenomenon of Performance," (1st, Northwestern University, School of Speech, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Characterization (Literature); Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; *Information Theory; *Interpretive Reading; *Language Research; *Literary Analysis; Literature; Research Opportunities; Semantics; Sensory Experience; Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Meaning (Theory of)

ABSTRACT

Communication theories provide some assistance to these involved with interpretive reading, but the performance of literature calls for its own theory based on meaning and the unique qualities of interpretive skills. Theories of meaning involve both word meaning, based on the generalized processes of shared language experiences, and a personalized meaning, based on individual, differentiated experiences of readers and audience members. Meaning includes both intellectual and emotional responses to a piece of literature. A theory based on meaning can establish other theories unique both to the experience and performance of literature, including explanations of the general principles of advanced interpretive reading. This suggests analytical studies on the phenomenon of interpretation as related to both literary subjects and their development in performance. Empirical research could center on distinguishing between naturally acquired skills and the learned components of interpretive techniques. (RN)

ED 087057

SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE

Papers presented at the first

DOCTORAL HONORS SEMINAR

IN

INTERPRETATION

The School of Speech
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

May 9-11, 1973

CS 500 563

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A Theory of Meaning for the Performance of Literature*

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by

Kristina Minister
Northwestern University

Beverly Whitaker's recent report on the status of research in interpretation exposes a singular lack of research activity in the profession.[1] Yet, performance activity can hardly be charged with poor health. This curious imbalance between our professional energies and our collective communication about our concerns might be reconciled through a theory of interpretation that explains performance, a theory that can provide a cooperative and heuristic base for our enthusiastic commitment to the performance of literature.

In this essay, the phenomenon of performance is taken as the source for the evolution of an interpretation theory that must possess certain requisites. First, the theory must be unique to the performance of literature. Professional activity already confirms that performance is the center of our interest at the same time that it implicitly affirms that literary theory, rhetorical theory, communication theory, and dramatic theory--as fruitful as they may be to particular aspects of interpretation--fail to account for the art itself. Secondly, a theory of the performance of literature must contain the potential to be seminal to analytical, empirical, and pedagogic research. Without a theory that is general enough to integrate research activity, we work in isolation,

*Slightly revised since presentation.

precluded from cooperative scholarship. A third requisite for a theory of performance is that it must account for the interpreter's repertoire: every kind of literature--printed, traditional, and concrete.

Jean-Paul Sartre observed that because we cannot take ourselves as objects, we go to the theatre to see our analogues, the actions of characters on stage.[2] Since dramatic literature is only one chapter in the interpreter's book, there must be other compelling reasons for attending interpretation performances. One explanation proposed is that we attend interpretation performance so that the interpreter may communicate the author's work to us.[3] The theory has high face validity, for the communication cycle is highly visible in the performance of literature and communication is a goal of literature. Indeed, spoken language--which must be defined in all of its three-dimensionality as communication--is the very medium of the performance of literature. Thus, communication is oral literature's fabric. Interpretation and communication function simultaneously and spontaneously, if there are no communication barriers.

Yes, communication theory does have high face validity, but by concentrating on the medium of performed literature, communication theory overlooks the essential matter of literature. Even though communication is crucial to the art of interpretation, it cannot give us a theory of the art any more than a description of pigment and its binder can give us a theory of painting.

Communication theory describes the exterior, community-based aspects of the performance to the neglect of the interior function of language in the individual. This neglect holds true for the audience as well, for the audience cannot actually share the response to the interpreter; the audi-

ence can only share the perception. Every human builds his own concepts, which are only partly shaped by word meaning. Humans share syntax, phonology, and printed word labels, all of which give an illusion of communication, but meaning is an irrevocably individual matter. Meanings will overlap to the extent that persons have participated in "the same" experiences; yet it should be noted that no two persons have identical experience.

To believe that meaning is an actual thing that can be transmitted via sound and light, or graphic configuration, is to practice reification. Admittedly, reification may be a more comfortable alternative than facing the truth that meaning is solitary in nature. We may prefer to seek sanctuary in the common property meanings of our language, but community meanings account for only a part of the meaning that each individual has acquired for words. Thus, communication theory rests on tenuous grounds for the interpreter in that it accounts for the aspects of performance that can be visibly and audibly verified, but it does not account for the way literature is known--through the cognitive activity of the individual.

We experience difficulty in achieving a reflective attitude toward language. Language and thought are so interdependent that we can't achieve a clear perspective about language, so intimately a part of our thinking. A better description of the communicative function of language in literature would provide an essential perspective. Susan Sontag has chosen a word that pins down this elusive role of communication in art theory and criticism: transparence. Sontag explains that "transparence means expeiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."[4]

Consider what the transparent medium of literature implies for the

interpreter. He is the manifestation of the poem, possessing the language of the poem with his speech and body. Paradoxically, he has given flesh and voice to the very thing--the language--that must be rendered transparent if the literature itself is to be experienced. He has become the body and the voice of the poem, yet he must somehow escape identification with his own flesh and voice to get at the real substance of the poem. This escape is imperative for both his own perception and his audience's perception of the poem.

We have all witnessed performers who have not achieved that release from self-identification. If they are novices, the problem may easily be located. But if the performers have a competent grasp of interpretation technique, failure to escape self-identification may be more difficult to detect. Ethos can impoverish the poem. This kind of performer--he has not yet earned the name of interpreter--may be experiencing his own articulatory gestures, his own paralinguistic and kinesic distribution in response to the text, but he stands in his own body, not cognitively involved with the poem, precluded from realizing what Wallace Bacon defines as the presence of the poem.[5]

Sartre describes this requisite loss of identity in the actor: "It is not the character who becomes real in the actor, it is the actor who becomes unreal in his character."[6] The interpreter, too, must become unreal, transparent, to discover the literary presence. But it is not a conscious process; he effaces himself by becoming the medium of the poem, thus turning his attention away from himself and away from the role of a communicative or a rhetorical surrogate for the poem. The interpreter is now free to fill his consciousness with the poem. It is at this point, on the brink of the phenomenon of performance, that a theory of interpretation

can be proposed.

The words of the poem are generic. They are categories of the significant experience of the language community, the chunks of linguistic matter that the writer synthesizes into a form that invites the reader to match his experience to the experience in the poem. The language of the poem and the thought of the reader unite in meaning. It is meaning that ties the common property values of the word to the idiosyncratic experience in the poem. It is in meaning that a theory, unique to the phenomenon of performance, can be built.

Several prejudices concerning the word meaning foster reluctance to accept such a concept for a theoretical base. The first prejudice, the illusion of communication, was exposed in the foregoing objection to communication theory. The argument has taught that a distinction must be made between word meaning and meaning. Despite the pervasive influence of print upon our perception, word meaning actually is no more than the category of community experience arbitrarily labeled by men; meaning is the knowledge that informs the consciousness of an individual. The individual takes the generalized, thus incomplete, meaning of community words and fills in their emptiness from his own experience. Meaning appears to be both a generalizing process, from the word, and a differentiating process, from the primary experience of the reader.[7] When the two processes meet, secondary experience--the experience of literature--is forged in the consciousness of the individual. The gap between word meaning and primary experience, with the subsequent cognitive process called meaning that leaps between the two, cannot be explained under the narrow rubric of word meaning.

The second prejudice grows from a fallacy of nominalization. It hides

in the part-of-speech category to which meaning has been assigned. Meaning is an act, a verb, but it has been wrenched into a thingness and confined to a mental function. Speech, another nominalized act, is confined to an overlaid physiological and acoustical existence. But speech and thought are acts that merge through meaning. L. S. Vygotsky confirms the unifying role of meaning in thought and language,[8] and, more recently, Roger Brown, building upon Jean Piaget's cognitive theories, confirms the interdependence of language and cognition.[9] To the extent that the act of interpretation relies upon the fundamental processes of speech and thought will a theory of interpretation begin to take shape from the knowledge of these functions. Understanding the ontogenetic development of speech helps us to locate the central act of meaning in interpretation. In the act of denotative meaning, speech is thought and thought is speech.

Ontogenetic developmental theory also provides the means to eradicate a third prejudice against meaning as a theory of interpretation. Meaning has been differentiated from word meaning, but meaning may continue to suggest intellectual meaning to the exclusion of emotion. Quite the contrary, a meaning theory resolves this familiar dilemma. Vygotsky asserts that his method "demonstrates the existence of a dynamic system of meaning in which the affective and the intellectual unite. It shows that every idea contains a transmuted affective attitude toward the bit of reality to which it refers."[10] Thus, genetic epistemology provides an argument for what interpretation instructors have long known by intuition: thought and speech merge in the performance of literature.

The reader's experience coalesces with the poem's intensionality, but the remarkable characteristic of literary experience is its temporal organi-

zation. Meaning unrolls out of nothingness, and unlike other uses of languages, literature is repeatable. The meaning of the poem may be unrolled again and again, with ever-varying change, providing that the reader's consciousness is filled with meaning. Audience members come to the theatre of interpretation to forge meaning out of nothingness, fascinated with the tensiveness between the interpreter's unfolding meaning and their own unfolding layers of meaning, past and present. Unfortunately, our vocabulary's inadequacy once again nominalizes meaning in its temporal context, reducing the process to imagination.

A theory based on meaning not only pinpoints the source of the interpreter's art; it is broad enough to integrate all aspects of the art. Everything that contributes to meaning is a valid component of the interpretative act. Mental vis-à-vis physical, and intellectual vis-à-vis emotional categorical boundaries don't exist in the individual consciousness filled with meaning. A theory of meaning includes both concepts and images, for images yield their meaning with remarkable expediency. The question of phonetic symbolism need not be approached apologetically if it is investigated under a theory of meaning that takes account of how we acquire speech, thus compelling us to recognize the validity of knowledge obtained through means other than word meaning.[11] Whatever it is that constitutes the specialized kinesic and paralinguistic phenomena in interpretation performance, it cannot be wholly explained as response to meaning. We have had the experience in rehearsal of our bodies' and voices' informing us of the meaning of the poem. In turn, during performance our bodies and voices inform the audience as well as ourselves once again. The kinesic flow, then, is more than an adjunct to meaning; it can also teach us meaning, just as speech and writing can teach us our own thoughts. The paralinguis-

tic function, too, appears to be synchronized with movement both as an adjunct to meaning and, at other times, as a teacher.

Finally, a theory of meaning accounts for all persons who perceive the poem, interpreter and audience. No separate explanation need be found for the audience. Each person, including the interpreter, shares his perception of the poem with every other person perceiving the poem. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist, acknowledges the solitary nature of human thought, yet observes that the distance between men "becomes a strange proximity as soon as one comes back home to the perceptible world, since the perceptible is precisely that which can haunt more than one body without budging from its place.[12] Merleau-Ponty describes the shared object as a "compresence" of perceptions.[13] The interpreter, then, in realizing the presence of the poem offers to each audience member and to himself a new compresence of poetic experience.

I believe that the strength of a theory of meaning lies in its potential to establish a body of theory unique to the performance of literature and to the experience of literature, including an explanation of the general principles of advanced reading of literature. Although the theory excludes historic investigation, it offers possibilities for examining relationships between the poem and cognitive functions in pre-literate communities. Cross-cultural and cross-dialectical studies could provide insight into how performance is learned.

In analytical research, an orientation toward meaning suggests an array of studies centering on phenomenological and hermeneutical methods.[14] Questions could be raised concerning how the imaginative consciousness places the literary subject in time and space, and what are the resulting adjustments of time and space in the performing area. Such studies in locus

would transcend "physical" and "mental" boundaries and expose the illusory dichotomy between analytical and empirical approches to literature.

Empirical research should distinguish between the naturally acquired and the learned components of interpretation before pedagogic research is undertaken. All of the contributors to meaning in interpretation--concepts, images, kinesic and paralinguistic phenomena, phonetic symbolism, and rhythm--can be systematically investigated. Interpretation empiricists will discover that several disciplines are acquiring an increasing body of information about cognitive events and related acts, and that scientific epistemology is undergoing changes that enhance the validity of cognitive measurement. But let the interpretation empiricist beware: there is a vast difference between the explanations of psychological research and the manner in which meaning appears to consciousness. Distinguishing between the acquired and learned aspects of interpretation performance demonstrates that the degree and acuteness of meaning in the individual consciousness is less a matter of ability than of capacity.

This speculative essay contains a theoretic statement that remains empty until hypotheses are tested against it--hypotheses of both an analytical and an experimental nature--that will give flesh to the statement. No one person can build a theory; cooperative scholarship is the key.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Beverly Whitaker, "Research Directions in the Performance of Literature," a paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, California, December, 1971.

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Beyond Bourgeois Theatre," in Theatre in the Twentieth Century, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), pp. 131-140.

[3]Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, L. LaMont Okey, The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967).

[4]Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 23.

[5]Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972), pp. 32-47.

[6]Jean-Paul Sartre, The Psychology of Imagination (1948; rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966), p. 250.

[7]Jeremy Anglin, The Growth of Word Meaning, Research Monograph No. 63 (Cambridge, Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1970).

[8]Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Thought and Language, ed. and trans. Eugenia Haufmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1962).

[9]Roger Brown, A First Language: The Early Stages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[10]Vygotsky, p. 8.

[11]For a discussion of phonetic symbolism for the performer, see "Onomatopoeia, Gesture and Synaesthesia in the Perception of Poetic Meaning," a paper delivered by Donald R. Salper at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, Dec., 1972.

[12]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signs, tran. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 15.

[13]Ibid., p. 16.

[14]For a recently completed study employing phenomenological method, see Janet Larson McHughes, "A Phenomenological Analysis of Literary Time in the Poetry of James Dickey," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1972.